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## Do sexist organizational cultures create the Queen Bee?

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'Queen Bees' are senior women in masculine organizational cultures who have fulfilled their career aspirations by dissociating themselves from their gender while simultaneously contributing to the gender stereotyping of other women. It is often assumed that this phenomenon contributes to gender discrimination in organizations, and is inherent to the personalities of successful career women. We argue for a social identity explanation and examine organizational conditions that foster the Queen Bee phenomenon. Participants were 94 women holding senior positions in diverse companies in The Netherlands who participated in an on-line survey. In line with predictions, indicators of the Queen Bee phenomenon (increased gender stereotyping and masculine self-descriptions) were found mostly among women who indicated they had started their career with low gender identification and who had subsequently experienced a high degree of gender discrimination on their way up. By contrast, the experience of gender discrimination was unrelated to signs of the Queen Bee phenomenon among women who indicated to be highly identified when they started their career. Results are discussed in light of social identity theory, interpreting the Queen Bee phenomenon as an individual mobility response of low gender identified women to the gender discrimination they encounter in their work.

I never used to believe in the glass ceiling, but by now I've realised it most definitely exists. It's caused by the masculine culture that men unconsciously preserve amongst each other. The other day for example I was told that while at work I should control my emotions better.

– Female senior executive, age 43

It is my experience that especially women are women's greatest enemy: They are much more critical of other successful women than men are.

– Female principal consultant, age 50

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Although the last decades have seen an increase in the number of women in the workplace, women all over the world still receive lower payment than their male counterparts and are less likely to reach higher management positions in organizations (Catalyst, 2002; Eurostat, 2009; Merens & Hermans, 2009). As exemplified by the two opening quotes that we recorded from two respondents in the current study, women today still face pervasive gender stereotypes and gender discrimination while attempting to climb the organizational ladder (Agars, 2004; Schein, 2001). Women aspiring to achieve positions of power have to contend with negative stereotypes suggesting that women have lower leadership ability, career commitment, and emotional stability (Eagly, Makhijani, & Klonsky, 1992; Heilman, 2001). Moreover, many organizations are dominated by men, leading to a preference for masculine over feminine work styles and a lack of female role models (Davey, 2008; Eagly, Karau, & Makhijani, 1995; Kanter, 1977; Linehan & Scullion, 2008; Yoder, 1994, 2002). As illustrated by the second quote, women in the workplace are sometimes seen as principally responsible for damaging the careers of other women. Indeed, psychological research on women in the workplace has identified 'Queen Bees' who achieve career success by derogating other women while simultaneously emphasizing their own career commitment and masculine qualities (Ellemers, Van Den Heuvel, De Gilder, Maass, & Bonvini, 2004; Staines, Tavris, & Jayaratne, 1974). In the current study, we aim to show that, rather than being a separate force obstructing the advancement of women at work, the Queen Bee phenomenon is a *consequence* of gender discrimination in the workplace which motivates some women (i.e., women who do not identify highly with their gender) to enhance their own success by subscribing to gender stereotypes while simultaneously emphasizing how they differ from other women.

### **The Queen Bee phenomenon**

It is often assumed that sexist behaviour in work settings mostly comes from men (Brenner, Tomkiewicz, & Schein, 1989; Jackson, Esses, & Burris, 2001). However, recent research suggests that women who succeed in male-dominated settings can also play a negative role in the advancement of their female subordinates. Although it is sometimes found that women who do achieve positions of power are motivated to improve career opportunities for other women and serve as their role models, several studies have shown women in positions of power to oppose rather than support attempts to improve the position of their female subordinates (e.g., Ellemers *et al.*, 2004; Staines *et al.*, 1974). This behaviour, whereby female leaders implicitly legitimize rather than question the disadvantaged position of women within their organization and perpetuate the organizational culture in which they became successful, has been termed the 'Queen Bee syndrome' (Staines *et al.*, 1974).

Evidence for the Queen Bee syndrome comes from studies showing female rather than male employees to be particularly critical of the career commitment, assertiveness, and leadership skills of their female colleagues (Ellemers *et al.*, 2004; Garcia-Retamero & Lopez-Zafra, 2006; Mathison, 1986; Parks-Stamm, Heilman, & Hearn, 2008). For instance, Ellemers *et al.* (2004) showed that female rather than male professors rated female PhD students as less committed to their career than male PhD students. At the same time, the female professors defined themselves in quite masculine terms, suggesting their disengagement from their gender group. These stereotypical opinions expressed by women in the workplace are particularly detrimental for the reputation of other women as their criticism is perceived to be more credible and persuasive than that of men

(Sutton, Elder, & Douglas, 2006), and less likely to be detected as gender bias (Baron, Burgess, & Kao, 1991). In essence, gender bias expressed by women provides a highly powerful legitimization of the disadvantaged position of women in the workplace. When successful women turn into Queen Bees during the development of their career, they can obstruct the advancement of women below them.

Discussions of the Queen Bee phenomenon, especially in the popular media (see Mavin, 2008, for an overview), have concluded from these findings that women are their own worst enemies, and that it is not men but actually women who stand in the way of the advancement of women in the workplace. This conclusion relates to two interrelated expectations that are biased towards women and that blame them rather than the context for gender discrimination in the workplace. Firstly, women are expected to help and promote each other in the workplace, while men are expected to compete amongst each other for the best jobs (Mavin, 2008). Secondly, women who do not do this but who join the competition for higher career outcomes are seen as particularly hostile and unfriendly and must have a deviant personality structure. As such, Queen Bees are seen as an important cause of gender discrimination in the workplace, and research has started addressing the question of who these women are, exploring stable personality traits such as low self-esteem or traditional gender attitudes to explain their hostility towards other women (Cooper, 1997; Cowan, Neighbors, DeLaMoreaux, & Behnke, 1998).

In the current study, we focus on the social context as a relevant factor to show that, in addition to being a *cause* of gender discrimination in the workplace, the Queen Bee phenomenon is an important *consequence* of workplace experiences, namely the gender discrimination women experience during their career. Instead of looking for stable individual dispositions or gender differences, we thus relate the Queen Bee phenomenon to consequences of addressing individual workers in terms of their gender group. Specifically, we argue that work settings in which women experience a high degree of gender prejudice and discrimination may lead women to comply with existing gender stereotypes to the degree that they concern other women (e.g., 'other women are less career oriented than men'). In such contexts, setting oneself apart from other women ('I am, by exception, very career oriented') is a strategy that can successfully improve the prospects for individual women. Importantly, we argue that not all women are equally likely to be influenced by gender discrimination in this way but that especially women who are not strongly identified with their female identity in the workplace are likely to become Queen Bees while striving for positive career outcomes.

### **Queen Bee behaviour as a response to social identity threat**

Ellemers (2001) was the first to explain the Queen Bee phenomenon as a response to social identity threat. Social identity is that part of people's self-image that is derived from the groups to which they belong (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Women working in organizations in which their gender is devalued, experience this as a threat to their social identity. Social identity threat can be reduced either by behaviours aimed to improve the standing of the group ('collective mobility', e.g., women combating negative stereotypes to improve the outcomes of women within their organization) or by a psychological dissociation from the group that negatively affects one's identity, accompanied by attempts to improve personal outcomes instead ('individual mobility', e.g., women stressing differences between themselves and other women in order to improve their own career outcomes).

Whether women strive to improve their social identity through individual or collective mobility is determined, in part, by their identification, that is the degree to which their gender is central to their self-definition. Previous work has found that high identifiers tend to stick with their group and work to improve their group's reputation when it is threatened. Low identifiers, however, distance themselves more easily from the group when it has a low reputation and instead tend to work for individual status improvement (Derks, Van Laar, & Ellemers, 2009; Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1997). It is important to note that, even though high versus low identifiers can be distinguished and show different types of responses, identification is a group-based contextual variable rather than a stable personality trait. The degree to which individuals identify with a group is likely to differ across group types and contexts. For example, women who do not identify with their gender group in one context (e.g., while at work) can identify more in a different setting (e.g., at a family gathering; see also Ellemers, Barreto, & Spears, 1999).

From a social identity perspective, the Queen Bee phenomenon can be seen as the response of women who enter an organization with relatively low gender identification (e.g., because they think their gender should be irrelevant while at work) and whose social identity is then threatened by an organizational culture that communicates that women are less worthy of achieving career success than are men. Even when women are not invested in their gender group at work gender bias is still threatening to their social identity because others categorize them into a category that they do not want to be placed in ('categorization threat', Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999). Low identifiers tend to respond to categorization threat by further dissociating themselves from other women, for instance by propagating gender stereotypes while simultaneously stressing their own masculine characteristics, as in the Queen Bee phenomenon. Indeed, in their examination of female university professors, Ellemers *et al.* (2004) found that especially women from the older generations (who achieved success when gender stereotypes were more negative than they are today) communicated the most gender stereotypical views of their female graduate students and reported the most masculine self-descriptions. However, although Ellemers and colleagues suggested this behavioural pattern to be indicative of an individual mobility response to social identity threat (see also Ellemers, 2001), they did not test directly whether it were the low gender identified women in particular who responded in this way.

### **The present research**

The current study is the first to test whether the masculine self-descriptions and negative stereotypical opinions about female subordinates held by some women in higher positions can be predicted by the amount of gender discrimination they experienced during their own career. We predict that the more gender discrimination women experienced along their way up the organizational ladder, the more they will work to improve their own outcomes by perpetuating these negative images of other women while simultaneously describing themselves in masculine terms. Moreover, given that individual mobility strategies are pursued mostly by individuals who do not identify strongly with their devalued group, we predict to find most signs of the Queen Bee phenomenon among women who report having relatively low gender identification at the time they entered the workforce. Combining these predictions, indicators of the Queen Bee phenomenon (i.e., more masculine self-descriptions, increased stereotypical perceptions of other women's career commitment, and more differentiation of the self

from other women) were expected to be found especially among senior women who reported to have been relatively low identified with their gender when they entered the workforce and who indicated experiencing a high degree of gender discrimination during the development of their career.

We tested this prediction in a sample of successful senior female employees from a number of different Dutch companies. Although in recent years, The Netherlands have seen a steady increase in the percentage of working women, 75% of women work part-time, and women receive on average 6.5% lower pay than men (when controlling for factors such as education and experience). Moreover, there are very few women in leadership positions in The Netherlands, for example women make up only 7% of the boards of the 100 largest companies (Merens & Hermans, 2009). Through an Internet survey, we sought to examine how being a senior woman with a successful career within an organization in which this is relatively rare, affects the opinions women hold about themselves and their female subordinates.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 94 women with a senior position within their company ( $M_{\text{age}} = 43.32$ , range 29–60,  $SD = 7.33$ ). To improve the generalizability of the findings, rather than examining female employees within one company, we invited women from several private, public, and semi-public organizations in The Netherlands to participate (i.e., four consultancy firms, one governmental ministry, and one training centre). They were recruited through their HR managers who identified women with relatively senior positions in their company (self-reported seniority  $M = 4.13$ ,  $SD = 0.66$  on a scale from 1 [junior] to 5 [senior]). Participants were contacted via e-mail to complete the Internet survey. The vast majority of respondents were highly educated (98% held at least a BA degree), and reported having a high ( $M = 7.93$ ,  $SD = 1.22$  on a 10-point scale) and influential ( $M = 3.50$ ,  $SD = 0.95$  on a five-point scale) position within their organization. Respondents were contracted to work on average 36.6 h per week (range 28–42,  $SD = 3.45$ ) which is considerably higher than the average among Dutch women (27.4 h; Groot & Breedveld, 2004) and consistent with the notion that these women were career oriented. Of the participants, 72% indicated having a managerial position (21% top management, 50% middle management, and 29% lower management). Two-thirds of the participants (63%) had at least one child. Overall, the companies in which women worked were perceived as relatively male dominated: the average percentage of female employees in the organizations was estimated to be 37% ( $SD = 18.96$ ) dropping to an estimated 22% women in managerial positions ( $SD = 22.45$ ).

### Measures

The survey was introduced as a questionnaire examining the factors that promote or hinder the career advancement of women in The Netherlands. Respondents were reminded of the low number of women in top management and were subsequently asked to answer questions about their own career experiences. All variables in the questionnaire were measured on seven-point scales unless otherwise indicated (1 = completely disagree, 7 = completely agree).

### Predictor variables

We first measured participants' *current gender identification* with three items (i.e., 'Currently I feel closely connected to other women', 'Currently I feel part of the group of women', 'Currently I identify with other women';  $\alpha = .84$ ). Then, participants were asked to think back to when they started working and to report their *gender identification at career start* (three items,  $\alpha = .91$ , e.g., 'When I started working I felt part of the group of women'). A principal components analysis on all six items measuring current gender identification and identification at career start revealed a clear two-factor structure, explaining 81% of the variance, in which each item loaded on the factor it was designed to measure. We measured *prejudice and gender discrimination experienced* with 11 items (e.g., 'In my career I have been mocked or discriminated against because I am a woman', 'In my career I experienced that ambitious women were hindered in pursuing their career and aspirations', 'I feel that my gender has stood in the way of obtaining important promotions and raises', 'The companies I worked for had a positive attitude towards women pursuing a career [reverse coded]',  $\alpha = .92$ ).

### Indicators of the Queen Bee phenomenon

We selected eight items from Bem's Sex Role Inventory (Bem, 1974; see also Ellemers *et al.*, 2004) and asked participants to indicate to what degree *masculine* (independent, dominant, adventurous, courageous,  $\alpha = .65$ ) and *feminine* (caring, modest, kind, accommodating,  $\alpha = .76$ ) traits characterized them. To assess *gender stereotyping*, we used four-item scales derived from Ellemers *et al.* (2004). Participants were asked to think about their subordinates and report the career commitment of the average male ( $\alpha = .75$ ) and female employee ( $\alpha = .57$ ; e.g., 'The average male/female employee finds it important to be successful', 'The average male/female employee often considers what he/she can do to advance in the organization'). Moreover, we adjusted these items to measure *personal career commitment* ( $\alpha = .76$ ; e.g., 'I often consider what I can do to climb up in the organization').

### Background variables

Finally, given the correlational nature of the study, it was important to check whether participants who reported low versus high levels of gender identification and experienced discrimination did not differ on any other variables that were potentially related to this difference such as their demographics or work outcomes. For example, it could be that women who reported high levels of experienced discrimination or gender identification were women who had made different life choices (e.g., lower working hours, more children) or who received different work outcomes (lower organizational levels, lower seniority, less influence). To be able to examine these alternative explanations, we measured the following background variables: *age*, *number of children*, *seniority* (1 = very junior, 3 = mid-level, 5 = very senior), the *organizational level* participants had reached (1 = very low, 10 = very high), how much *influence* they had within their organization (1 = very little influence, 5 = very much influence), the *number of hours* they were hired to work per week, the *gender composition* of the company currently worked for ('Please estimate the percentage of women working in your company'), and the *percentage of women in management positions* in this company.

## Results

### Correlations

We first examined correlations between theoretically relevant explanatory variables (gender identification at career start and experienced gender discrimination) and the background variables (see Table 1). This enabled us to exclude a number of alternative explanations. Importantly, there was no relationship between the core predictors, namely perceived initial identification and experienced gender discrimination. As such, there were no indications that reports of experienced discrimination were contaminated by level of gender identification or that gender identification was tainted by experienced discrimination.

Secondly, women who reported having entered the workforce as low versus high identifiers did not differ in terms of demographic background variables (age, number of children), current work outcomes (e.g., their seniority, amount of influence that accompanied their current job or the number of hours they worked) nor the type of organizations they currently worked for (i.e., its gender composition). The only difference found between women who entered the workforce as low versus high identifiers was, not surprisingly, their current gender identification ( $r = .43, p < .01$ ). However, we established that gender identification at career start showed a sufficient amount of unique variance that was unrelated to current gender identification to permit its use as a separate predictor of the Queen Bee phenomenon. Importantly, the moderate size of the correlation implied that only 18% of the variance in initial gender identification was shared with current gender identification leaving 82% of unique variance to independently predict other variables associated with the Queen Bee phenomenon. Moreover, almost all respondents (83 out of 94) indicated a different degree of current gender identification compared to when they started their career (both lower and higher levels were reported) indicating that they were able to differentiate between these two variables (for evidence of the reliability of retrospective self-reports, see Jaspers, Lubbers, & De Graaf, 2009).

Finally, there were no indications that women who reported more gender discrimination differed in any other way from women reporting less experienced gender discrimination except for the type of organization they worked in (i.e., as expected, women in organizations that were predominantly staffed by men reported experiencing more gender discrimination).

### Regression analyses

In order to examine whether relative differences in experiences of gender discrimination and initial gender identification were related to the degree to which women showed signs of the Queen Bee phenomenon, we performed hierarchical regression analyses following recommendations by Aiken and West (1991). In step 1, we entered control variables (i.e., current gender identification, participants' age, and organizational level). In step 2, we tested the main effects of initial gender identification and experienced gender discrimination (both standardized). In step 3, we tested the predicted moderation effect of gender identification by entering the interaction between initial gender identification and experienced discrimination. Significant interactions were interpreted by calculating simple slopes for low ( $-1 SD$ ) and high ( $+1 SD$ ) identifiers and for women experiencing relatively low ( $-1 SD$ ) and high ( $+1 SD$ ) levels of gender discrimination. Table 1 reports the means, standard deviations, and zero-order correlations between the independent and dependent variables.

**Table 1.** Means, standard deviations, and zero-order correlations between independent, dependent, and background variables

1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	13.	14.	15.	16.
Identity career start <sup>c</sup>	Experienced gender prejudice <sup>a</sup>	Current identity <sup>a</sup>	Age	Number of children	Seniority <sup>b</sup>	Level <sup>c</sup>	Influence <sup>b</sup>	Work hours	Percentage women	Percentage female leaders	Masculine traits <sup>a</sup>	Feminine traits <sup>a</sup>	Commitment male-female <sup>d</sup>	Personal career commitment <sup>a</sup>	Commitment self-female <sup>a</sup>
<i>M</i> = 3.51 <i>SD</i> = 1.39	<i>M</i> = 3.42 <i>SD</i> = 1.24	<i>M</i> = 4.20 <i>SD</i> = 1.27	<i>M</i> = 43.13 <i>SD</i> = 7.53	<i>M</i> = 1.24 <i>SD</i> = 1.07	<i>M</i> = 4.13 <i>SD</i> = 0.66	<i>M</i> = 7.93 <i>SD</i> = 1.22	<i>M</i> = 3.50 <i>SD</i> = 0.95	<i>M</i> = 36.60 <i>SD</i> = 3.45	<i>M</i> = 37.12 <i>SD</i> = 18.96	<i>M</i> = 20.84 <i>SD</i> = 20.95	<i>M</i> = 5.20 <i>SD</i> = 0.79	<i>M</i> = 4.07 <i>SD</i> = 0.81	<i>M</i> = 1.59 <i>SD</i> = 1.07	<i>M</i> = 4.81 <i>SD</i> = 1.03	<i>M</i> = 1.01 <i>SD</i> = 1.14
1.	.05	.43**	.09	.05	-.05	.02	-.03	.05	-.03	-.06	.01	.10	-.04	.03	-.07
2.	I	-.03	.07	-.12	.15	-.07	-.09	.10	-.39**	-.45**	.123	.18	.15	.17	.20
3.	I	I	.12	.04	.05	.20*	.17	-.10	.26*	.12	.16	.13	.02	.21*	.08
4.	I	I	I	-.01	.40**	.40**	.27**	.04	.31**	.18	.24*	-.01	-.02	-.33**	-.29**
5.	I	I	I	I	-.29**	.04	-.06	-.29**	.09	.04	-.20*	-.08	.05	.04	.04
6.	I	I	I	I	I	.28**	.26**	.09	.03	.02	.21*	-.18	.01	-.15	-.11
7.	I	I	I	I	I	I	.66**	-.03	.42**	.34**	.32**	-.16	.16	-.13	-.04
8.	I	I	I	I	I	I	I	.08	.40**	.38**	.29**	-.23*	-.03	.08	.16
9.	I	I	I	I	I	I	I	I	-.21*	-.26*	.16	-.003	-.04	.19	.15
10.	I	I	I	I	I	I	I	I	I	.73**	.21*	-.03	-.03	-.17	-.10
11.	I	I	I	I	I	I	I	I	I	I	.08	-.11	-.06	-.21*	-.11
12.	I	I	I	I	I	I	I	I	I	I	I	-.02	.31**	.13	.17
13.	I	I	I	I	I	I	I	I	I	I	I	I	I	.03	.43**
14.	I	I	I	I	I	I	I	I	I	I	I	I	I	I	.81**
15.	I	I	I	I	I	I	I	I	I	I	I	I	I	I	I
16.	I	I	I	I	I	I	I	I	I	I	I	I	I	I	I

Note. *N* = 94; \**p* < .05; \*\**p* < .01.

<sup>a</sup> Seven-point scale.

<sup>b</sup> Five-point scale.

<sup>c</sup> Ten-point scale.

<sup>d</sup> Difference score of rated career commitment of men–women (both on seven-point scales).

<sup>e</sup> Difference score of rated personal career commitment–women career commitment (both on seven-point scales).



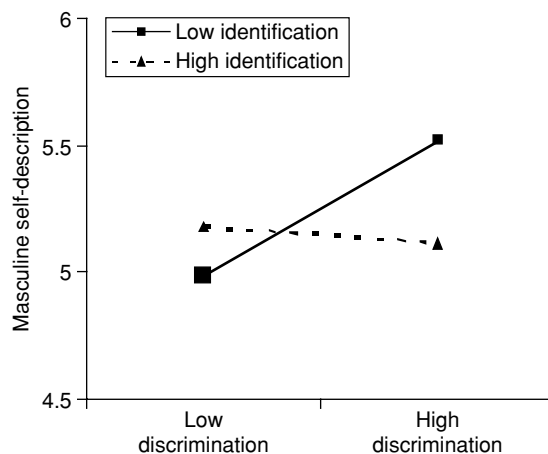
### *Masculine and feminine self-descriptions*

The regression analysis on masculine self-description revealed a main effect of organizational level,  $B = 0.19$ ,  $SE = .09$ ,  $F(1,90) = 5.05$ ,  $p = .027$ , semi-partial  $r^2 = .05$ , indicating that women higher up in the organization generally described themselves as more masculine. In addition, the predicted interaction between experienced gender discrimination and gender identification was significant,  $B = -0.15$ ,  $SE = .08$ ,  $F(1,87) = 3.73$ ,  $p = .057$ , semi-partial  $r^2 = .04$ . As depicted in Figure 1, in line with predictions, the women who described themselves most masculine were low identifiers who had experienced a high amount of gender discrimination. Specifically, among women who were less identified with their gender, the amount of experienced gender discrimination was significantly related to high masculine self-descriptions,  $B = 0.27$ ,  $SE = .11$ ,  $t(87) = 2.45$ ,  $p = .02$ . However, among women who were highly gender identified, experiencing gender discrimination was unrelated to masculine self-description,  $t(87) = -0.29$ ,  $p = .78$ . As a result, among women who reported having experienced relatively high levels of gender discrimination, those low identified at career start now described themselves as somewhat more masculine than those who were initially highly identified with other women,  $B = -0.20$ ,  $SE = .11$ ,  $t(87) = -1.754$ ,  $p = .08$ .

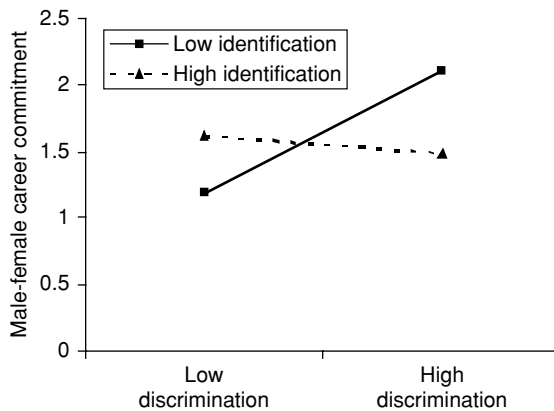
The degree to which participants described themselves in a feminine way was unrelated to gender identification or experienced discrimination. Thus, the experience of gender discrimination among low identified women was related to more masculine but not less feminine self-descriptions.

### *Gender stereotyping*

We examined the degree to which women negatively stereotyped other women by calculating whether they reported a difference between the career commitment of male and female employees in subordinate positions (positive scores indicate higher perceived male than female career commitment). As predicted, the relation between experienced discrimination and gender stereotyping was significantly moderated by participants' initial gender identification,  $B = -0.26$ ,  $SE = .11$ ,  $F(1,87) = 5.91$ ,  $p = .02$ , semi-partial



**Figure 1.** Masculine self-description (seven-point scale) as a function of gender identification at career start and experienced gender discrimination.



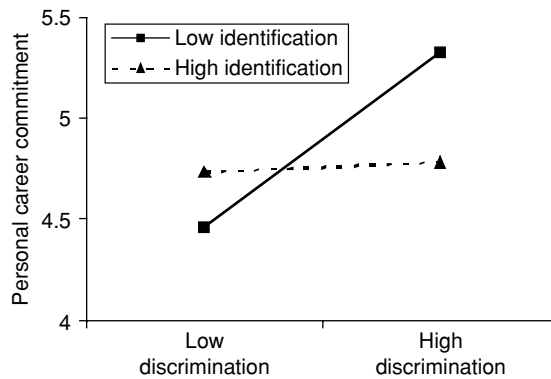
**Figure 2.** Difference in reported career commitment of average male and female employee as a function of gender identification at career start and experienced gender discrimination.

$r^2 = .06$  (see Figure 2).<sup>1</sup> Again, the highest amount of gender stereotyping of others in the organization was found among less identified women who had experienced relatively high levels of gender discrimination. Specifically, among women who reported to be less identified with their gender at career start the more discrimination they had experienced the larger the gender gap in career commitment they reported,  $B = 0.46$ ,  $SE = .16$ ,  $t(87) = 2.90$ ,  $p = .005$ . Among highly identified women, experienced discrimination was unrelated to gender stereotyping as predicted. Moreover, among women who reported having experienced gender discrimination, low identifiers reported a somewhat larger gender gap in the career commitment of male and female subordinates than high identifiers,  $B = -0.31$ ,  $SE = .16$ ,  $t(87) = -1.93$ ,  $p = .057$ .

#### *Personal career commitment and distancing*

To examine whether women rated themselves as different from other women, we asked participants to indicate their own career commitment. Personal career commitment was predicted by the interaction between initial gender identification and experienced gender discrimination,  $B = -0.20$ ,  $SE = .10$ ,  $F(1,87) = 4.56$ ,  $p = .036$ , semi-partial  $r^2 = .04$  (see Figure 3). Whereas high identifiers reported similar levels of career commitment irrespective of experienced discrimination ( $t < 1$ ), low identifiers who had experienced high compared to low levels of gender discrimination reported higher career commitment,  $B = 0.429$ ,  $SE = .14$ ,  $t(87) = 3.16$ ,  $p < .01$ . Consequently, among women who reported experiencing high levels of gender discrimination, low identifiers

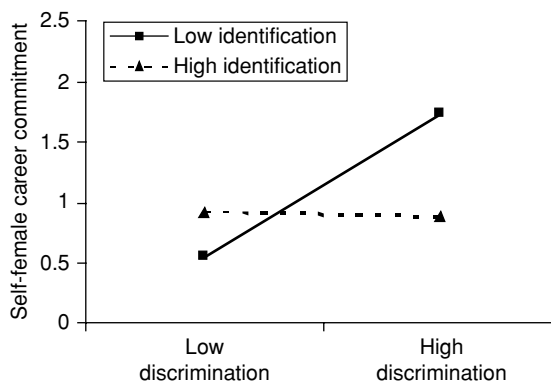
<sup>1</sup>Analyses for male and female career commitment separately, revealed that this effect was jointly driven by perceptions of high male career commitment, as well as low female career commitment. Reported male career commitment ( $M = 5.39$ ,  $SD = 0.80$ ) was predicted by the interaction term in the regression model,  $B = -0.16$ ,  $SE = .08$ ,  $F(1,87) = 3.79$ ,  $p = .055$ , semi-partial  $r^2 = .04$ . Whereas high identifiers reported similar levels of male career commitment irrespective of experienced discrimination ( $M_{\text{low discrimination}} = 5.42$ ,  $M_{\text{high discrimination}} = 5.38$ ), low identifiers who had experienced relatively high levels of discrimination reported higher male career commitment ( $M = 5.69$ ) than low identifiers who reported lower levels of experienced discrimination ( $M = 5.10$ ). Although this interaction effect did not reach significance in the analysis of female career commitment ( $M = 3.80$ ,  $SD = 0.69$ ),  $B = 0.11$ ,  $SE = .07$ ,  $F(1,87) = 2.26$ ,  $p = .14$ , semi-partial  $r^2 = .02$ , the estimated means showed the predicted pattern: low identified women who had experienced a high degree of gender discrimination reported lower female career commitment ( $M = 3.58$ ) than low identifiers who had experienced less discrimination ( $M = 3.92$ ) and high identifiers ( $M_{\text{low discrimination}} = 3.81$ ,  $M_{\text{high discrimination}} = 3.89$ ).



**Figure 3.** Personal career commitment (seven-point scale) as a function of gender identification at career start and experienced gender discrimination.

reported higher personal career commitment than high identifiers,  $B = -0.27$ ,  $SE = .14$ ,  $t(87) = -1.90$ ,  $p = .06$ .

In order to check the degree to which women actually distanced themselves from other women (by rating their personal career commitment as higher than the career commitment of other women), we directly compared the reports of personal career commitment and female career commitment that were discussed above. Analysis of the difference between personal career commitment and average female career commitment (positive scores indicate higher personal than female career commitment) revealed the predicted interaction,  $B = -0.31$ ,  $SE = .11$ ,  $F(1,87) = 8.27$ ,  $p = .005$ , semi-partial  $r^2 = .07$  (see Figure 4). In line with the results of gender stereotyping and personal career commitment discussed above, the women who reported the largest discrepancy between themselves and other women were the women who reported low gender identification when they started their career and who experienced gender discrimination during the development of their career. As predicted, low identifiers reported a significantly larger difference between themselves and other women to the



**Figure 4.** Difference in reported personal career commitment and career commitment of average female employee as a function of gender identification at career start and experienced gender discrimination.

degree that they had experienced gender discrimination,  $B = 0.60$ ,  $SE = .16$ ,  $t(87) = 3.77$ ,  $p < .001$ . By contrast, high identifiers reported the same difference between themselves and other women regardless of the discrimination they reported to have experienced. Consequently, under high gender discrimination, low identifiers were more inclined than high identifiers to emphasize the difference between themselves and other women,  $B = -0.43$ ,  $SE = .16$ ,  $t(87) = -2.68$ ,  $p = .01$ .

## Discussion

In the popular media, research on the Queen Bee phenomenon has been summarized as showing that 'female rivalry in the workplace may sometimes be as important as sexism in holding back women's careers' (Dobson & Iredale, 2006). The current study is the first to suggest that the Queen Bee phenomenon may be an *outcome* of gender discrimination experienced by women rather than a female characteristic obstructing the advancement of women in the workforce. The results show that women who displayed most signs of the Queen Bee phenomenon (i.e., increased masculine self-description, increased gender stereotyping and distancing from other women) were women who reported being low gender identified when they entered the workforce and who experienced a high degree of gender discrimination on their way up. As such, these results present a more nuanced view of the popular idea that women in general are more inclined than men to compete against each other, and that as such women are their own worst enemies.

Instead, the results imply that the Queen Bee phenomenon is a result of social contextual circumstances and in particular the social identity threat that women experience in companies that discriminate against women. The tension between women's personal ambitions and the gender stereotypes expressed around them creates a threat to their social identity, particularly so if the gender identity is not relevant for their self-view in that context (in the case of low identifiers). Although one way to deal with this threat is to fight gender bias and to improve women's outcomes, low identifiers may experience social categorization threat (Branscombe *et al.*, 1999) leading them to disengage from their gender group in an attempt to prevent others from evaluating them on the basis of their gender. The current study indeed confirmed the significance of women's social identity in the development of the Queen Bee phenomenon: especially women who reported relatively low levels of gender identification when they started their career and who reported having experienced high levels of gender discrimination were also found to currently define themselves in relatively masculine and highly committed terms while simultaneously being critical of the career commitment of other women. In this way, these women emphasized a discrepancy between themselves and other women. These results suggest that women who show evidence of the Queen Bee phenomenon do not do so because of their inherent predisposition to compete with other women, but because they see this as a way to pursue their ambitions in sexist organizational cultures.

## Limitations and suggestions for future research

Although this study is the first to provide evidence for the social identity explanation of the Queen Bee phenomenon in a real-life sample of women in senior positions in the Dutch workforce, one obvious limitation of the current study is the correlational nature of the data. We took care in ruling out alternative explanations of our findings by showing that women's gender identification at career start was unrelated to the

level of gender discrimination they reported, their demographic background variables or job outcomes. However, although theoretically less likely, we cannot rule out the possibility of reversed causality. For example, it is possible that relationships between experiencing gender discrimination and indicators of the Queen Bee phenomenon could be reversed such that women recall experiencing more gender discrimination themselves when they stereotype other women and present themselves in a masculine fashion. This would mean that a masculine self-presentation and gender stereotyping other women would ironically lead women to feel they are the target of gender discrimination rather than that they avoid being a target of gender discrimination. However, given the moderation by gender identification that we found, reverse causation would also mean that behaviour associated with the Queen Bee phenomenon only leads to increased experienced discrimination among low, but not high identifiers. Apart from the fact that it is difficult to explain why this would be the case, this is at odds with previous work that shows that low identifiers are the least likely to become the target of prejudice (Kaiser & Pratt-Hyatt, 2009), or to report gender discrimination (Eccleston & Major, 2006; Major, Quinton, & Schmader, 2003). This previous work also contests a retrospective bias explanation, that is that women who currently show signs of the Queen Bee phenomenon strategically report both lower initial identification and higher levels of experienced gender discrimination in order to justify their current success. However, given the positive correlations between gender identification and reports of gender discrimination found in previous work, we think that strategic concerns would lead women with low gender identification to deny rather than admit to the existence of gender discrimination. As such, we feel that the most plausible causal path is the one that was tested in the current study. Now that the current study found evidence for these relations in a correlational field study among women in senior positions, further experimental or longitudinal research can more unambiguously establish the causal direction of the relationship between gender identification at career start, experienced gender discrimination, and the development of the Queen Bee phenomenon.

Since the current analysis explains the Queen Bee phenomenon as a consequence of socio-contextual variables rather than pre-existing gender differences, this analysis is not limited to successful women in sexist organizational settings. The same analysis can be applied to members of other devalued minorities (e.g., ethnic minorities, gays, individuals from low socio-economic backgrounds) in other intergroup settings (e.g., educational settings) who strive to achieve positions that are uncommon for members of their group (see, for example the work by Fordham & Ogbu, 1986 on 'acting White'). Whenever minority group members strive for positive outcomes in contexts in which others communicate low expectations of them due to their group membership, there is an opportunity for them to increase their success by agreeing with these stereotypes while simultaneously communicating why they are better. Importantly, our analysis suggests that this behaviour is not due to their stable individual dispositions, but rather to the context that limits their prospect of achieving success while simultaneously maintaining their attachment with their group.

### **Implications**

One might question whether it is problematic when ambitious women adapt to inhospitable organizational contexts by becoming more masculine and setting themselves apart from other women. The current results could also be interpreted as showing the adaptability of women by fulfilling their aspirations and achieving individual mobility

even in organizations that hold negative stereotypes about their gender. Moreover, it also questions the common notion that women should take care of each other in the workplace, while men are expected to compete and pursue their personal career aspirations (Mavin, 2008). Nevertheless, previous research suggests that Queen Bee behaviour, although perhaps beneficial for the career success of some women, can have quite detrimental consequences for women at an earlier career stage. First, the negative gender stereotypes expressed by Queen Bees affect the career opportunities of other women within the organization because negative gender stereotypes communicated by female sources are less likely to be identified as gender bias and will therefore remain unchallenged (Baron *et al.*, 1991). Second, studies suggest that female employees will look to female superiors for inspiration and to estimate their own chances of achieving success (Buunk & van der Laan, 2002; Lockwood, 2006; Ragins & McFarlin, 1990; Scandura & Williams, 2001). In order for female managers to function as inspirational role models, their female subordinates need to be able to identify with them and feel similar to them (Ensher & Murphy, 1997; Lockwood, 2006). This is less likely to happen when female managers actively distance themselves from other women and present themselves in a masculine way (Ziegler & Stoeger, 2008). As a consequence, female employees who are managed by Queen Bees are less likely to find role models to show them how to achieve their ambitions. Thus, although Queen Bee behaviour may be a successful way to improve the career outcomes for some women, at the same time it is likely to limit the more general advancement of women at work. In this sense, Queen Bee behaviour remains an individual level strategy that might reinforce rather than challenge gender-based inequality (Ellemers & Van Laar, 2010).

In recent years, businesses have invested effort in improving organizational success by diversifying the gender and ethnic make-up of their organization. The current results have important implications for the outcomes of these diversity initiatives. Companies that wish to enhance the output of their efforts to improve the number and relative status of underrepresented groups within their organization, would do well to focus not only on simple measures that increase the number of women or ethnic minorities in top positions (e.g., strict targets, affirmative action programmes), but should also put effort into changing the organization's culture regarding these groups at work. The results suggest that, as long as the organizational culture remains biased, putting some isolated token individuals in positions of power does not necessarily improve opportunities for other members of the same social group within the organization. Within companies that communicate a negative opinion about minorities or women, representatives of these groups placed in positions of power, especially those low identified with their group, are likely to align their opinions with the negative expectations of their group held within the company in order to prove their own worth and secure their personal position. As such, when salient stereotypes induce minorities to show that they are better than other members of their group, simply increasing the number of minority representatives in top positions will not improve opportunities for these groups as a whole.

Instead, the current results suggest the importance of diminishing gender discrimination and prejudice as a feature of organizational cultures and increasing the value attached to gender diversity. In companies that ensure that women can achieve career success without having to forego their gender identification, women in senior positions are more likely to become inspiring role models who have positive attitudes about the potential of their female subordinates. In companies that succeed in improving the respect communicated to female employees, it no longer matters whether women identify with their gender at work. Under those conditions both low and highly identified

women will aim to achieve success without becoming Queen Bees. As indicated by the results of the current study, low identifiers differ from high identifiers in their opinions about other women only in work settings that communicate a low regard for women. This implies that reducing gender bias in organizational contexts is likely to improve the opinions of less identified women about other women as in those contexts low identifiers have no need to differentiate themselves from other women to reduce social identity threat.

### Conclusion

Previous research on the Queen Bee phenomenon has often been interpreted as suggesting that it is not men but women who stand in the way of the advancement of women in the workplace. The results of the current study present a more nuanced view of this interpretation. By demonstrating the relation between experienced gender discrimination, social identity, and the Queen Bee phenomenon, the current study suggests that it is not specifically men or women that stand in the way of improving work outcomes for women, but that it is the pervasiveness of organizational gender stereotypes that obstruct women in reaching career success and make it more likely that low identified women turn against their own group.

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